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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6727

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 001063

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS, DRL, DS/IP/SCA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: VIOLENT REACTION TO SIKH TEMPLE KILLING --
RELATIVE CALM RESTORED

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Life has returned to relative normalcy in major cities across the state of Punjab after curfews were imposed to halt violent protests over the death of a religious sect leader and injuries to another on May 24 during a clash in a Sikh temple in Vienna, Austria. Mainstream Sikhs have objected to what they call the sacrilegious practices of the sect. News of the violence in Vienna spread to a handful of cities in Punjab on May 24 and rioting quickly followed in the areas around the industrial city of Jalandhar, which has resulted in at least one death, several injuries, dozens of burnt vehicles and thousands of stranded passengers from cancelled trains and blocked roads. On May 25, the state government imposed a curfew in four cities and the GOI deployed paramilitary forces to quell the violence. By the evening of May 25, the state returned to relative calm with the curfew relaxed and military forces on stand-by to control any flare-ups. However, many are preparing for a possible build-up of tensions when the body of the deceased sect leader arrives from Vienna, possibly as early as May 27. END SUMMARY.

Mayhem in Punjab Following Sect Leader's Death

2. (U) Riots erupted in four cities in the Punjab on May 24 in response to the killing of 56-year old religious sect leader Sant Ramanand in an attack by armed Sikhs in Vienna, Austria. The Punjab violence on May 24-25 resulted in one death, several injuries, dozens of burnt vehicles and thousands of passengers stranded due to cancelled trains and blocked roads. At the Vienna temple, six young Sikh men armed with guns and knives allegedly stormed into a hall where visiting sect leader Sant Niranjandass, his deputy Sant Ramanand and hundreds of worshippers had gathered. In the assault, Sant Ramanand died immediately from wounds, while Sant Niranjan Dass sustained serious injuries.

Deras: Caste, Class and Theological Tension

3. (SBU) Sant Ramanand was a leader of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan, one of many religious sects that have cropped up in

recent years in Punjab and Haryana. Dera followers tend to be Dalits, lower income, landless, and feel excluded from the Sikh religious mainstream and from management and control of the places of worship. Mainstream Sikh orthodoxy - dominated by the land-owning, wealthier Jat community - views the religious practices of these Deras as sacrilegious (such as the worship of living "gurus"). The conflict occasionally leads to emotive appeals, confrontations and violence. The mix is particularly volatile in a state such as Punjab which has the highest proportion of Dalits among its population in the country.

Curfew Imposed, Relative Calm Restored

14. (U) Crowds of Dera followers gathered in Jalandhar and three surrounding cities in the Doaba belt upon hearing news of the Vienna attack at around 9pm (local time) on May 24. Violence broke out shortly after and continued the early morning on May 25 until the state government announced a curfew and called in heavy reinforcement, including the deployment of fourteen paramilitary companies, to help control rampaging mobs.

15. (U) A sense of calm has returned to Punjab the evening of May 25 and has continued through May 26. No major incident of rioting or violence was reported after mid-day on May 25. On May 26, the curfew was relaxed during daylight hours in Jalandhar and Ludhiana. The public transportation system remains stalled, and thousands of passengers stranded as

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trains to and from Punjab were cancelled. The state will continue to be tense in the coming days because tempers are expected to flair again when the body of the slain leader arrives from Vienna, as early as May 27. The government will remain vigilant and on high alert.

Peace to Punjab, Government Appeal

16. (U) Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a Sikh from Punjab, appealed for calm amid rioting on May 25: "Whatever the provocation, it is important to maintain peace and harmony among different sections of people." Home Minister P. Chidambaram met with members of parliament from the Punjab on Monday and pledged additional resources to help state authorities "restore normalcy" in the state. The Home Ministry has deployed fourteen companies of GOI paramilitary forces thus far, and is ready to send eleven more. "We are willing to help the Punjab Government restore peace," he added. Punjab Chief Minister Prakash Badal convened an all-party meeting on May 26 to show political consensus for a peaceful solution to the violent protests that have wracked the state in recent days.

Comment: Caste Tension in India's wealthiest states

17. (SBU) One of the most important and foundational tenets of Sikhism is equality of all and rejection of the caste system. But the growth of caste-based Dera sects on the periphery of the religion illustrates that remnants of social gradations continue to exist. Though vastly diminished, the millennia old caste system continues to hold some sway in everyday life in the Punjab and Haryana. END COMMENT.
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